



113 / 52

Theology vol III. 10

A
R E V I E W
OF THE
GENUINE DOCTRINES
OF
CHRISTIANITY.

COMPREHENDING
R E M A R K S
ON SEVERAL PRINCIPAL
CALVINISTICAL DOCTRINES;

And some OBSERVATIONS on the Use of
REASON IN RELIGION,
ON
HUMAN NATURE,

AND ON
FREE AGENCY.

By JOSEPH TOWERS.

L O N D O N :

Printed for W. SANDBY, at the Ship, opposite St. Dunstan's
Church in Fleet-Street. M, DCC, LXIII.

[Price One Shilling and Six-pence.]

THE
OF THE
OF THE

CHRISTIAN
OF THE
OF THE



OF THE
OF THE
OF THE

OF THE
OF THE
OF THE

THE
P R E F A C E.

CONTROVERSIAL writing has been so multiplied in the Christian world, and frequently carried on in a manner so little agreeable to the genuine spirit of Christianity, that many sensible persons are apt to conceive a distaste against every production of that kind. But as religion is in itself the most important thing in the world, so it is likewise of very great importance that men should entertain just notions of it. And though matters of mere opinion, as such, are not perhaps of very great moment; yet any notions which have a tendency to prevent the practical influence of religion on the minds of men, are certainly of very bad consequence; and are the more dangerous and prejudicial, when they are received as sacred doctrines, and those who have imbibed them are afraid to examine them with freedom and impartiality.

IT must be a matter of regret, to every man who is himself convinced of the important truths of the Christian revelation, who reverences its divine author, and is concerned for the promotion of the interests of his religion, as a scheme calculated in the most admirable manner to promote the cause of virtue, and the present and future happiness of mankind, to observe the absurd and unamiable representations which are frequently given of this most excellent institution. It is often so enveloped in the absurdities of some of its mistaken professors, that scarce any traces of its original simplicity and beauty are discernible.

IT must however be acknowledged with pleasure, that most of those absurd tenets, which have long contributed to disfigure and obscure the original doctrines of the gospel, and which have been sheltered under the venerable name of orthodoxy, have for a considerable time past, by the most learned and inquisitive Christians of almost every denomination, been discarded as unscriptural, as well as irrational. Bigotry, and a slavish attachment to estab-
lished

lished systems, to creëds and articles of faith, the inventions and devices of men, have given way to a rational and free enquiry into the real doctrines of the sacred writings themselves; by which means the Christian system has been better understood, and more rational and consistent sentiments have been established in a considerable part of the Christian world.

IT is however to be regretted, that notwithstanding these beneficial effects, which have been the natural result of freedom of enquiry, and the prevalence of more liberal sentiments, there are yet great numbers of pious well-meaning Christians, who are very strongly attached to the absurd and contradictory tenets of Calvinism.

AS these doctrines appear in themselves (though they may not always produce their natural effect) to be very unfavourable to the morality of the gospel, and to the promotion of that real virtue and benevolence of heart, which it is the principal design of Christianity to inculcate and promote; as they must appear, upon an impartial examination, to be contrary

to the general tenor and design of the sacred writings, however they may be fortified by imaginary proofs drawn from thence; and as the idea which they give of the Christian system is an absurd and unamiable one, and such as hath a natural tendency to prejudice, and in fact frequently does prejudice, many against Christianity, and even against religion itself; every attempt to remove such opinions, and to establish juster sentiments of the religion of Jesus, must, if it has any effect, be serviceable to the Christian cause.

TO obviate, therefore, some of those prejudices, which are entertained by those who favour Calvinistical principles, against those more rational and consistent ideas of the Christian religion, which the free exercise of reason, and the unprejudiced study of the sacred writings, naturally suggest; and to give a slight sketch of that admirable system, as it is really delineated in the books of the New Testament, is the design of this tract.

IT may be presumed, that an endeavour to promote such sentiments in religion, as are
ho-

P R E F A C E.

vii

honourable to the supreme Creator, and agreeable to the dictates of reason as well as revelation, though imperfect in itself, will be favourably received by the Intelligent and the Candid. But how far this tract may be calculated for such a purpose, must be submitted to the impartial judgment of the Public.

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

1000

A
R E V I E W
OF THE
GENUINE DOCTRINES
OF
CHRISTIANITY.

THE diversity of sentiment which hath appeared in the Christian world, with respect to many important points of Christian doctrine, must be a matter of considerable surprize to a speculative observer. It would be very natural to imagine, that in a divine revelation, intended to lead mankind to the knowledge of those divine truths which are necessary to their salvation, those truths would be there laid down with such a degree of precision and perspicuity, that no man of moderate understanding, who was sincerely desirous of knowing the truth, could possibly

mistake it. But however natural and reasonable this supposition may be, the fact certainly is, that very different representations of the Christian religion are given by persons who appear equally sincere in their intentions.

BUT as there does not appear to be any such real obscurity in the revelation itself, when fairly examined, at least with respect to the general aim and design of it, this diversity of opinion concerning it must be attributed to other causes. And it appears very evident, that a much greater uniformity of opinion, with respect at least to the more important and essential parts of religion, would have taken place in the Christian world, had men freely exercised their own reason in enquiring after truth, and discovering the real doctrines of revelation; and had not been induced to hood-wink their understandings, and receive as the dictates of infallible truth, whatever some particular zealous and over-bearing men, who have become heads and leaders of sects and parties, have thought proper to declare were the only true and orthodox doctrines of scripture. Articles of faith, creeds, &c. perhaps may justly be considered as having hindered in a very considerable degree the advancement of just notions of the doctrines of the gospel; as by them
the

the mistakes of some particular men have been handed down as sacred doctrines, and by that means the timely rectification of such errors hath been in a great degree prevented. By the increase of creeds and articles of faith, systems of divinity have been formed, and by them the scriptures have been interpreted. Instead of thoroughly and impartially examining what appeared to be the genuine doctrine of the scriptures, men have brought their own prejudices and pre-conceived notions with them; and at all events the scriptures must be made to tally with these notions, however contrary they might be to the real meaning of the sacred writings, however absurd and inconsistent in themselves. Mistaken and false interpretations of some of the more difficult and obscure parts of the sacred writings, have been adopted as essential parts of the doctrine of the gospel; and though perhaps contrary to some of its most fundamental principles, when rightly understood, yet the reception of some of these notions hath been considered as the only true criterion of soundness and orthodoxy. And these tenets have been received by many with such implicit assent, that they have considered it as impious to disbelieve, or even to doubt the truth of them. And indeed when once any set of opinions can be brought to be

con-

considered in this light, little argument will be sufficient for their support; superstition, or a too timorous piety, will, with the majority, fortify them against all the force of reason and of argument.

HAD not, by means of this kind, a veil of obscurity been thrown over the most simple, intelligible, and rational of all religions, those heats, animosities, and religious contentions, with which ecclesiastical history is disgraced, could not possibly have subsisted in the Christian world; and probably the present distinctions of sects and parties would have been in a great degree extinct.

As it appears that it was the want of the free exercise of reason, which hath been the principal occasion of the absurd and mistaken representations which have been given of Christianity; and as it is a notion still entertained by those who adhere to the doctrines in this tract more particularly opposed, that mere human reason, (or, as it is sometimes emphatically called, *carnal* reason) is not an adequate judge of religious matters; and that men are not capable, by the use of their natural faculties and powers, of having just conceptions of those divine truths which are the objects of
reve-

revelation, nor of understanding revelation itself, a few remarks will be offered upon that subject.

IT is indeed no easy matter to reason successfully with those, by whom the decisions of reason are not admitted. But it may be observed, that however ready such persons are to appeal from the determinations of reason, when they make against themselves, they are nevertheless willing to retain it in their service, as long as it can be employed with any degree of success on their own side. They will reason as long as they are able, in defence of their own tenets; but when they find they are no longer defensible on any rational principles, they then reject the authority of reason. Agreeable to an observation somewhere made, reason is against them, and therefore they, in their turn, are against reason.

THAT the use of reason in religion should have been opposed by the patrons and adherents of papal tyranny and superstition, is not at all wonderful. If ignorance cannot justly be said to be the mother of devotion, it is nevertheless the most suitable nurse for superstition, bigotry, and implicit faith. It was therefore natural for those in the interest of the Roman see, to
oppose

oppose with all their might the exercise of reason, as the most dangerous enemy of their ecclesiastical usurpation. But that Protestants, whose religion appears to be founded on the use of reason, should nevertheless refuse to acknowledge the propriety of appeals to it in the determination of religious controversies, is not easy to be accounted for.

COULD we be infallibly certain, that any doctrine was revealed, and any action or actions commanded, by the supreme Creator himself ; it would undoubtedly be our duty to assent to the one, and to obey the other, whether we could discern their probability and fitness, or not. Reason itself would dictate this. The Deity can neither be himself mistaken, nor can he deceive his creatures ; and his wisdom and his goodness render it impossible that he should command any thing that is not fit and proper. Therefore whatever we certainly know to be taught or commanded by Him, reason itself would teach us to believe and to obey. To object against any part of the known will of God, because we do not discern its reasonableness, would be both absurd and impious. But surely there can be no impiety in examining, whether what is offered to us as a divine revelation, is really so or not ; much less in examining

examining what are, and what are not, the real doctrines of revelation itself. We have otherwise no security against any species of delusion and imposture: but at Constantinople we must receive implicitly the doctrines of the Koran, and at Rome we must believe Transubstantiation.

THE warmest friends to Christianity need not be under any apprehension of that sustaining any detriment by the freest examination, provided it be a candid and a fair one. The uncorrupted religion of Jesus will approve itself to the understanding of every impartial and reasonable man. It is enthusiasm, bigotry, and superstition alone, that are endangered by the appeal to reason; and it is forbidden only in those erroneous theological systems, the patrons of which are conscious that their schemes will not stand the test of reason; and therefore they are reduced to the necessity of employing this subterfuge to evade its force. Truth itself fears no scrutiny. It is the direction of the great apostle of the Gentiles, to *prove all things, and hold fast that only which is good*^a. He directed those to whom he preached,

to

^a 1 Theff. v. 21.

to judge what he said; and desired no other assent to his doctrines, than what their own unbiaſſed reason led them to. And he commends the Bereans in very ſtrong terms, becauſe they were free enquirers; they believed not the apoſtles themſelves implicitly, but *ſearched the ſcriptures whether thoſe things were ſo*^b.

INDEED it is eaſy to prove by many inſtances, that the ſcriptures are very far from giving any countenance to a rejection of reaſon. We find, on the contrary, both in the old and in the new teſtament, frequent appeals to the reaſon and underſtanding of mankind. God himſelf is repreſented in ſeveral places as reaſoning with his creatures^c. Chriſt often appeals to the underſtandings of thoſe who heard him^d. St. Paul is repreſented as *reaſoning* with Felix the Roman governor concerning the faith in Chriſt^e. The ſame apoſtle reaſons with king Agrippa^f, with the Athenian philoſophers^g, and with the Jews^h. And that an ability of underſtanding the ſcriptures, is not confined to

^b Acts xvii. 11. ^c Particularly in Iſaiah ch. v. 3. xxviii. 23—26. Ezek. xviii. 24—32. and Micah vi. 2, 3.
^d Mark viii. 17—21. John viii. 46. ^e Acts xxiv. 24, 25. ^f Acts xxvi. 8. ^g Acts xvii. 16—31. ^h Acts xvii. 2, 3.

to those who in some supernatural manner have their minds prepared for the reception of divine truths, or by some divine irradiation are already initiated in the knowledge of them, is evident from our Saviour's own words, who directs even the unbelieving Jews to *search the scriptures*ⁱ; which it cannot be supposed he would have done, had they not been naturally capable of understanding them. And indeed of what use can that revelation be, which requires another revelation to explain it?

INDEED the least reflection must convince us, of the necessity of our exercising our reason in reading the scriptures. For there are many passages in the sacred writings, which, were we to understand them literally, would be either unintelligible or false. Here then we naturally employ our reason, as we do in all other writings, to discover the real meaning of the writer. We are obliged of necessity thus to exercise our reason, if we would in any tolerable degree understand the scriptures, or indeed any thing else. Why then are we forbid to use our reason freely in religious enquiries? In fact, the notion that

B

reason

ⁱ John v. 39.

reason is not a proper guide in religious matters, is so egregiously absurd, that any man, but one who through the prejudice of education, or something of that kind, has espoused this strange dogma, must be amazed that there should be any necessity of confuting it.

HAVING in some degree, it is presumed, established this principle, that we may with safety and propriety take reason as our guide, in an examination of what are the genuine doctrines of the gospel; we shall, after a few previous observations, proceed to that enquiry, in that method which appears the most natural and rational. And this certainly must be, to enquire what were the doctrines which Christ himself principally inculcated upon his followers and disciples; and what it was that his apostles appear chiefly to have inculcated upon those to whom they preached. For it would be very irrational (however frequently that method may have been taken) to explain these more intelligible parts of the new testament, the meaning of which is so obvious that it strikes at the first view, with such as are metaphorical and obscure, and capable of different interpretations. But it is somewhat remarkable, that those who have imbibed the most absurd and inconsistent notions of Christianity, are particularly
fond

fond of St. Paul's epistles; and read and quote them much oftener, than they do the gospels, and other less controverted parts of scripture. The reason of which appears to be, that these, as being in some places somewhat difficult and obscure, are better calculated to be so explained as to countenance any favourite doctrine, than those parts of scripture which are more plain, and less capable of perversion. Some such use appears to have been made of St. Paul's epistles, even in the most early ages of Christianity. St. Peter observes, that there were, in St. Paul's epistles, *some things hard to be understood, which those that were unlearned and unstable wrested, even in his time, to their own destruction* ^k.

IN profane authors we always make use of those parts, the meaning of which is clear and evident, to explain and illustrate those which are dark and obscure. And it is certain that no reason can be assigned, why this most rational method should not be taken with the scriptures.

IN our intended review of the doctrines of the new testament, we shall begin with our

B 2

Lord's

^k 2 Peter iii. 15, 16.

Lord's sermon on the mount, the longest and most considerable discourse that we have recorded as preached by him. We find it composed chiefly of moral precepts, and directions for the regulation of his disciples conduct; of exhortations to peaceableness, purity, forgiveness of injuries, candour in judging of others, resignation to the providence of God, and the practice of justice and equity, and that extensive benevolence which comprehended in it the love even of their enemies. Our Lord inculcates the practice of these virtues on his disciples with peculiar emphasis and force, as the only thing that could recommend them to his favour, and on which they could place any rational dependance. *Whosoever (says he) heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded on a rock*¹. It is with these words our Saviour's discourse ends; in the whole of which his design manifestly is, to lead them to the sincere *practice* of piety and virtue; and to a greater degree of it than was then generally practised by the Jewish scribes and

¹ Matt. vii. 24, 25.

and Pharisees. For our Lord tells them, *Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven* ^m.

THERE is not the least ground for the far-fetched interpretation that is sometimes given to the last-quoted text, viz. that the righteousness there spoken of as necessary to qualify them for entering into the kingdom of heaven, was the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. Our Lord is evidently exhorting them to *personal* righteousness; for he is throughout his whole discourse inculcating virtues which they themselves were to practice. His meaning evidently is, that if they would gain the favour of God, and attain eternal life, they must not content themselves with a formal observance of the external duties of religion, and with appearing to men to be religious, as the scribes and Pharisees, and hypocrites, that he was speaking of, did; but that they must regulate their lives by the rules of religion and virtue, not in appearance only, but in reality, in sincerity and singleness of heart.

WE find our Lord in the other parts of the gospels enforcing the love of God and our neighbour, as the sum and substance of religion. And he in particular represents the practice of benevolence and social affection, as the distinguishing characteristic of the professors of his religion. *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another* ⁿ. And he represents the keeping his commandments, as the proper criterion by which they might judge of their love to him. *He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me* ^o.

THERE is an incident of our Lord's life recorded, in which he hath pointed out in a very strong and beautiful manner, that nothing but doing the will of God would be a recommendation to his favour. It is said that, in the midst of one of his discourses, *while he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to see him. Then one said unto him, behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?*

ⁿ John xiii. 35. ^o John xiv. 21.

brethren? And he stretched forth his hand towards his disciples, and said, Behold my mother, and my brethren. For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother ^P. Giving them to understand, in a most expressive manner, that they were more allied to him by the practice of piety and virtue, than by any other relation. This is what he appears to have taken every opportunity to inculcate; for we are also told, that when *a certain woman—lift up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked; — he said, Yea, rather blessed are they that bear the word of God, and keep it* ^Q. And in his pathetic exhortation to his disciples, a little before his crucifixion, recorded in the latter part of St. John's gospel, he with great earnestness repeatedly exhorts them to persevere in keeping his commandments, as the only proper test of their love to him.

It is likewise very evident, that in the representations which Christ gives of the future world, he always describes their final state as determined by their own moral character. In
the

^P Matt. xii. 46—50. ^Q Luke xi. 27, 28.

the end of the world the Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire:—Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father ^r. In another place; *at the end of the world, the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire* ^s. Again; *the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father, with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works* ^t. If the final state of mankind was to be determined (agreeable to the tenets of some Christians) by a mere arbitrary election of some favoured individuals to eternal life, without any respect to their own *personal* merits, whilst the remainder of the human race were suffered to perish; or if it had been determined by the warmth and fervency with which they had relied on the merits or righteousness of Christ; it would be very extraordinary, if this was the true state of the case, that these representations of Christ, as well as those of the apostles in the other parts of the new testament, should concur in declaring, that, in the future world,

^r Matt. xiii. 40.—43. ^s Matt. xiii. 49, 50. ^t Matt. xvi. 27.

world, men would be rewarded or punished. *according to their works.*

INDEED if we take a view of all our Saviour's discourses, parables, and public instructions, it will appear plainly that the general tendency of them is, to inculcate upon his disciples and followers, the sincere practice of piety, humility, benevolence, and the most exalted virtue; and to enforce this by imprinting deeply in their minds the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments; and forcibly pointing out the wisdom of sacrificing our temporal to our eternal interests, whenever they come in competition with each other. And with these ideas of the design of the Christian religion, we shall find the representations given of it by the apostles in other parts of the new testament, perfectly to coincide.

WE are very far from finding, in the accounts which are given in the acts of the apostles, of the discourses made by the apostles in the promulgation of Christianity, any of those unintelligible and irrational doctrines which have been taught in later times. Their discourses are intelligible, consistent, and repugnant to no principle of reason. St. Paul's oration to the Athenians is a striking instance
of

of this ^u. After having censured their idolatry and superstition, he proceeds to preach to them the true God, the Creator of the world ; and to give them juster sentiments of him than they then appeared to entertain. He shews the absurdity of considering God as confined to temples, or as a local deity ; and teaches them, that God was not to be worshipped by men, as though he needed any thing of them ; because it was from him that they received *life, and breath, and all things*. He represents the Deity, not as a God of a particular country or people, but as the God and Father of the whole human race ; and from thence infers the absurdity of representing him by any image. Having established these first principles of natural religion, he goes on to preach to them some of the more peculiar doctrines of the Christian revelation. *The times of this ignorance* he says, (speaking of the superstition and idolatry which had prevailed among mankind) *God winked at ; but now commandeth all men every where to repent : because he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained ; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that*

^u Acts xvii. 22—31.

that he hath raised him from the dead. We find a striking difference between the method here taken by this great apostle, and that which hath been since taken by many modern preachers of the gospel. The apostle establishes revelation on the foundations of natural religion. He urges them to repentance, as that which it was the end and design of Christianity to promote; and as a motive to it preaches to them the doctrine of a future state of retribution; in which Jesus was to preside as the supreme judge: and for a proof of his divine mission and authority, he urges his resurrection from the dead. He says not a single word of the natural incapacity of men to do any thing which could recommend them to God; nor does he once tell them, that a reliance on the merits or righteousness of Christ would be sufficient for their salvation. Which, if they had really been such capital and essential doctrines of Christ's religion, as they have since been represented to be, he certainly, when he was thus preaching the gospel, could not possibly have omitted.

WHEN St. Peter preached to the Jews, after having healed a lame man in the temple, and represented that miracle, which he declared to have been done by the power of Christ, as a
proof

proof of his divine mission ; he adds, *Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ;* and concludes with telling them, *that God had raised up his son Jesus, and sent him to bless them, in turning away every one of them from their iniquities* ^w. And when Paul and Barnabas preached to the Lystrians, their words are, *We preach unto you, that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein : who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness* ^x. In which the natural ability of man to conform to the rules of religion is clearly implied ; and also his ability of discerning the existence and character of the Deity by the mere light of nature.

IN the account which St. Paul gives of himself to Felix the Roman governor, we find the following expressions : *after the way which they (the Jews) call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are*
written

^w Acts iii. 12—26.

^x Acts xiv. 15—17.

written in the law and the prophets. And have hope towards God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust : and herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence towards God, and towards men ^v. Nor when Felix sent for Paul, to hear him concerning the faith in Christ, is he represented as saying any thing about the favourite doctrines of some modern systems of divinity ; but is described as reasoning of *righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come*. And in St. Paul's speech for himself, before king Agrippa and Festus, after reciting the manner of his miraculous conversion, he gives this account of the method in which he first preached Christianity. *I was not* (says the apostle) *disobedient unto the heavenly vision : but shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance* ^z.

INDEED any man who reads the acts of the apostles, with any degree of attention and impartiality, must be perfectly convinced that
the

^v Acts xxiv. 14—16. ^z Acts xxvi. 19, 20.

the doctrines which they taught, and those which have been since taught by some who have affected to be very close imitators of them, were totally different. And the account which is given in the Acts, of the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, to the Christian faith, is a strong evidence of the regard that is ever paid to sincere piety and virtue by the Almighty ; and what little ground there is for the notion, that men cannot recommend themselves by their own actions to the favour of God. It is on the contrary plainly declared in this relation, that the *prayers* and *alms*, the piety and benevolence, of a Roman officer, had so recommended him to the divine favour, that an angel was sent to him in order to occasion his conversion to Christianity. For the reason which the angel gave for his extraordinary appearance to him, was, *Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God* ^a. This eminent instance of the attention and regard of the divine being to real piety and virtue, wherever found, so struck the apostle Peter, who had imbibed the narrow notions of his countrymen, that the favour of God was confined to their nation,

^a Acts x. 4.

tion, that he opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.

BUT it is from the epistles of St. Paul, as hath been before observed, that some of the strongest proofs for the Calvinistical doctrines, and some others which have been founded upon them, are supposed to be drawn. It will not fall within the compass of this tract, to enter into a particular discussion of all the passages in St. Paul's epistles, which are urged in support of these opinions; nor to give those more rational and consistent interpretations, which have been given by several excellent commentators of such passages. And indeed a proper attention to those parts of scripture, the meaning of which is more obvious and less controverted, and to the general tenor of the sacred writings, would carry more conviction with it, than any examination of particular texts. For when once men have been accustomed to read any particular parts of scripture to a certain sense, and to annex a certain set of ideas to such and such phrases, though perhaps totally foreign from the original meaning of the writer, they naturally consider

consider every attempt to interpret any such passages to a different sense than that in which they have been accustomed to understand them, as a wresting and perverting of them. But nevertheless, some general observations upon St. Paul's epistles, and some of the doctrines which are founded upon a misunderstanding of them, may be serviceable to our design.

It should be remembered, in the reading of these epistles, that they were written to particular churches, and persons, and on particular occasions; and had an immediate reference in many places to some contentions and disputes which had arisen in the primitive churches, and some of which were peculiar to the first ages of Christianity. Without a proper attention therefore to the particular view and design of the apostle in writing each epistle, it will be impossible to form any clear notion of his meaning. These circumstances, together with that obscurity which naturally attends epistolary writings of a remote age, must, in the very nature of the thing, make St. Paul's epistles more difficult to be understood than many other parts of the sacred writings.

It appears that there were in the apostles time many of the Jews who had embraced
Christianity,

Christianity, but who nevertheless were very much attached to the ceremonial law of Moses, and who laboured to prove that it was necessary for the Gentiles, and all the professors of Christianity, to conform to the Mosaic rites ^b. St. Paul, in his epistles, opposes the notions of these judaizing Christians; he teaches them, that all who believed in Christ, and embraced his religion, would receive the free remission of their past sins, without any conformity to these ceremonial rites. But from these declarations of the apostle, that they were admitted into the Christian church, and had received the remission of their sins, by virtue of their faith in Christ, and without any respect either to their observance, or non-observance, of the law of Moses, the ceremonial part of which was entirely abolished by the Christian dispensation; it hath been inferred, that it was criminal for men to suppose that their own actions would contribute to, or be the occasion of, their final justification; or that a conformity to the laws of religion and virtue, the practice even of real works of righteousness, would be a means of their obtaining eternal happiness: though it is the clear and express language of St. Paul himself, as well as of the other sacred

C

writers,

^b Acts xv. 1—29. xxi. 20—25.

writers, that eternal life would be the reward of those, and of those only, who *by patient continuance in well-doing sought for glory, and honour, and immortality.*

ALL the different texts in St. Paul's epistles, which speak of faith as the cause of man's salvation, may be very rationally and consistently explained, and agreeably to the general tenor of the scriptures, without having recourse to those unreasonable interpretations which are frequently put upon them. And it may be proper to observe, that there was, in the very nature of the thing, a particular reason why faith should have been inculcated with peculiar force in the first ages of Christianity. It was certainly essentially necessary, that at that time faith should be established as a first principle. Those to whom the gospel was first preached, must have been previously convinced of the divine mission and authority of Christ, before they could be expected to obey his laws. But in later ages, and to those who already acknowledge the mission and authority of Christ, the *practice* of the duties of Christianity seems the principal thing to be inculcated. Though it must be acknowledged, that exhortations to faith may notwithstanding be very pertinent and advantageous to professed Christians; for
it

it can scarcely be imagined that so many professors of Christianity would be inattentive to the practice of its duties, if they were really and heartily convinced of the truth and importance of religion.

BUT there is another reason assigned in the new testament on which account men were required to believe, viz. that they might receive remission of sins. Men in their present state are surrounded with innumerable temptations, which render it morally impossible that they should be entirely free from sin; and the greatest part of mankind do, and in all ages of the world did, sin very frequently. *All have sinned* (says St. Paul) *and come short of the glory of God*^c. As all men, therefore, must have been conscious of having offended their maker, in a greater or a less degree, and been therefore sensible that they stood in need of mercy and forgiveness; but could not have any certain assurance of their being in a state of favour and acceptance with him; the Almighty thought proper to send his Son into the world, to die upon the cross, that all those who would believe in him might receive remission of sins, and consider his death as a proof of it. The death

C 2

of

^c Romans iii. 23.

of Christ may therefore be considered as a memorial, and an evidence, to all mankind, of the placability of God. *We were reconciled to God by the death of his son*^d. It was by faith in the blood of Christ, that God thought proper, for infinitely wise reasons, to dispense his mercy to mankind. But it is not therefore to be supposed, that the death of Christ was a *motive* to induce God to the exercise of mercy. The all-gracious Parent of mankind, essentially good and merciful in his own nature, needs no inducements to be merciful to his own creatures. On the contrary, it is the language of scripture, that *God so loved the world, that HE gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish*^e.

BUT it is very certain that it could not have been the doctrine of St. Paul, that faith in Christ would of itself entitle men to eternal salvation without the practice of holiness; because it is the plain and express language of St. Paul, and indeed of all the scriptures, that *without holiness no man shall see the Lord*. And it appears likewise equally clear, from St. Paul's own epistles, that faith in Christ would not necessarily produce that holiness, which
was

^d Romans v. 10. ^e John iii. 16.

was indispensably necessary to the completion of their salvation; and that the justification which he speaks of their receiving, by virtue of their faith in Christ, was not a final justification; nor did it, in itself, give them a right to eternal life; which will appear very plainly if we consider, that those very persons whom he addresses as *called, enlightened, justified, reconciled to God, and saved by faith in Christ*, he frequently exhorts to a conformity to the commandments of Christ, and the laws of righteousness, assuring them that without that they would have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. *Be ye therefore* (says the apostle) *followers of God as dear children:—for this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ, and of God: let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience*^f. *Be not deceived: God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the spirit, shall of the spirit reap life everlasting*^g. From all which it is very evident, that when the
apostle

^f Ephesians v. 1—6.^g Galatians vi. 7—8.

apostle speaks of their being saved by faith in Christ, his meaning is not, that it intitled them to eternal happiness; but that they were by that saved from the guilt of their past sins, and received into the favour of God, notwithstanding their former alienation from him. That on their faith in Christ, they received from the free grace or mercy of God the remission of their past sins, without their previously doing any thing to obtain such remission; and that if they afterwards continued in a sincere endeavour to conform themselves to the laws of Christ, notwithstanding those imperfections which are always attendant on human obedience, they would finally be approved by him, and made partakers of that happiness which he hath promised to all his true disciples. That St. Paul did not consider a real faith in Christ as necessarily in itself giving a right to eternal life is very evident from his epistles; and it is observable, that speaking even of himself, (and of the reality and sincerity of his own faith he certainly could have no doubt) he says, *I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway*^h; in which

^h Corinthians ix. 27.

which the apostle manifestly speaks of his own salvation as *conditional*, and as depending on the discharge of his duty, and his adherence to the laws of virtue. “ This single passage “ (says a very noble and ingenious writer) is a “ full answer out of the mouth of St. Paul “ himself, to all the mistakes that have been “ made of his meaning in some obscure expressions concerning grace, election, and “ justification.” * It may also be observed, that Christ himself represents persons who had such a degree of faith in him, as to enable them to prophecy and work miracles in his name, who nevertheless would be in the number of those who would finally be rejected by him. *Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven ; but he that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name ? and in thy name cast out devils ? and in thy name done many wonderful works ? and then will I profess unto them, I never knew ye : depart from me ye that work iniquity*ⁱ. We have also a text in the epistle to the Hebrews, which

* Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul, p. 26.

ⁱ Matthew vii. 21—23.

which clearly supposes and expresses the possibility of men's being finally condemned, notwithstanding their having a real faith, being enlightened by the gospel, and even made partakers of the holy spirit. *It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come; if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance* ^k. And St. Paul, in the epistle to the Colossians, says; *You that were sometime alienated, and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled, in the body of his flesh through death, to preserve you holy and unblameable, and unreprieveable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel* ^l. Plainly teaching them, that their reconciliation to God by faith in Christ, would not issue in their final salvation, without they continued stedfast in their obedience to the laws of Christ; and that notwithstanding their present reconciliation to God by faith in Christ, their final salvation was *conditional*. It is not however to be supposed that the professors of Christianity

* Heb. vi. 4—6.

^l Colossians i. 21—23.

Christianity were to be entirely free from sin, in order to insure their final salvation : man is surrounded with such innumerable temptations, that some degree of moral imperfection is always attendant on humanity. And whilst we sincerely endeavour to do the will of God, our involuntary and unallowed imperfections will be forgiven by our merciful Creator. *If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous^m.* But we must endeavour, sincerely and uniformly, to obey the will of God ; that must be the prevailing turn and bias of our minds ; and without such a sincere conformity to the laws of our creator, we have not the least reason to expect his final approbation, nor to be made partakers of that felicity which he hath promised to bestow upon the righteous.

THE phrase, *being saved by faith*, may be very rationally explained, even when it refers to man's final salvation ; though the phrase is certainly frequently used in a different sense. For those who by a firm belief in the doctrines which Christ taught, of a future state of retribution, &c. are induced to refrain from, and avoid,

^m 1 John ii. 1.

avoid, the practice of vice, and to conform to, and regulate their lives by the laws of piety and virtue, may, with the strictest propriety of speech, be said to be *saved by faith*. Because though they are not saved on account of their faith; yet as their faith is the motive that induces them to regulate their lives by the rules of religion, they may very properly be said to be saved by that.

It must be acknowledged, that those who adhere to the Calvinistical doctrines of justification, election, &c. do nevertheless admit the necessity of holiness, as supposing that faith will necessarily produce it. But it appears even from the new testament, that men may really have faith who do not act in conformity to it; and perhaps observation on many characters in real life would be a sufficient evidence of the *possibility* of it. And though these notions may be, and certainly frequently are, entertained by persons who are sincerely virtuous; yet to teach men that they are incapable by their own natural powers, of so far conforming to the laws of righteousness as to attain the favour of God, must naturally slacken their endeavours after it. And to teach them that their own actions can in no degree recommend them to the divine favour, and that they are not to
expect

expect any reward hereafter on account of any thing which they themselves can do, is certainly depriving men of the strongest *motives* to a life of piety and virtue; and appears to be in a very great degree subverting the grand design of the Christian revelation.

BUT amongst all the absurd doctrines which have been pretended to be founded on St. Paul's epistles, there does not appear to have been any so totally repugnant to every idea of the moral character of God, and against which every sentiment of humanity so strongly rebels, as that of Predestination. St. Paul hath shewn, that God hath elected or chosen some particular nations and collective bodies of men, to enjoy some eminent religious advantages; as the Jews the Mosaic dispensation, and the Gentiles the Christian; which they were favoured with not on account of their respective merits, but entirely because it was the will and pleasure of the Divine Being that it should be so^a: and which peculiar advantages he certainly might confer, consistently with the most perfect justice, on whatsoever nations or bodies of people his infinite wisdom should see fit. But from a
total

^a See Romans chap. viii. ix. x. xi.

total misunderstanding of the nature of the election which the apostle was speaking of, he has been thought to mean that God had arbitrarily elected a certain number of individuals to future happiness, to whom the means of salvation was given; whilst the rest were reprobated, and consigned over to eternal misery. And all that is alledged in vindication of the moral character of the Deity, which so much suffers in this shocking representation of the divine conduct, is, that mankind incurred this sentence in consequence of Adam's transgression; by which he and all his posterity became objects of the divine wrath, and were subjected to everlasting misery: though the scriptures nowhere represent any thing but death being entailed on mankind in consequence of the fall. Thus the whole human race are said to have been *justly* subject to eternal misery, for an action committed many ages before the greater part of them existed; though it is the universal doctrine of the scriptures, that men are punished only for their own works. It is said to have been the doctrine of some of the predestinarian writers, that " God of his own
" pleasure, antecedent to all sin in the creature,
" original or actual, did agree to glorify his
" sovereignty and justice in the eternal rejection and damnation of the greatest part of
" mankind,

“ mankind, as the end ; and in their un-
“ avoidable sin and impenitency, as the
“ means.”

REASON, revelation, and universal nature proclaim this truth, *That God is good to all, and that his tender mercies are over all his works* : but in what possible manner can we reconcile this with these doctrines ? with the supposition, that he has devoted, by an irreversible decree, millions of his creatures to endless misery, without even having given them a possibility of avoiding it ? It is indeed amazing, that such a doctrine, so totally repugnant to every idea, not only of goodness and mercy, but even of equity and justice, should ever have been considered as a part of that divine religion, which the Father of mercies, the God of love, hath instituted as his last and most merciful dispensation to the sons of men.

INDEED notwithstanding the absurd and erroneous interpretations which have been given of some parts of St. Paul's writings, they are in themselves perfectly rational and consistent ; and entirely agreeable to the doctrine of Christ and the other apostles. It is only when some particular detached passages of his epistles, are
interpreted

interpreted without a proper regard to the peculiar circumstances which attended his writing them, and to the whole scope of his reasoning, that he appears to differ from them. This apostle, in all his epistles, inculcates the uniform practice of virtue with great force and energy. And the account which he gives of the future judgment, perfectly agrees with that given in the gospels. *The judgment of God is according to truth:—who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, and honour, and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath; tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil;—but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good: for there is no respect of persons with God°.*

THE epistles of the other apostles are attended with less difficulty. That of St. James is almost entirely composed of instructions for the regulation of the Christian conversation of those to whom he wrote. This apostle inculcates very forcibly

° Romans ii. 2—11.

forcibly the necessity of *practical* religion; and cautions them against imagining that faith alone was sufficient for their final salvation. *Be ye (says he) doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves:—What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and hath not works, can faith save him? — By works a man is justified, and not by faith only* ^p. And the same apostle represents the practice of benevolence, and personal holiness, as the sum of religion. *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father, is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world* ^q.

THE two general epistles of St. Peter are likewise composed of persuasives to personal virtue, urged chiefly from the consideration of the future judgment; together with some exhortations to steadfastness under those trials to which the first Christians were more peculiarly exposed. And, agreeable to the representations which have been before given of the design of the gospel, this apostle declares the intention of it to be, *to call them to glory and virtue*:

^p James i. 22. and ii. 14—24. ^q James i. 27.

virtue : and that by the gospel-dispensation are given to us exceeding great and precious promises ; that by these we might be made partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And in order to point out to them in what the excellency of the knowledge of Christ consisted, after having exhorted them to faith, virtue, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity ; he adds, for if these things be in you, and abound, they make you neither barren, nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ^r. And the following verse is remarkable, and seems to corroborate the interpretation that hath been before given, with respect to some passages in St. Paul's epistles, viz. that the justification by faith which that apostle speaks of, was not an absolute and final justification, but only a remission of the sins of their past lives, previous to their conversion to Christianity. He (says the apostle) that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see far off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. And the following expressions of the apostle clearly intimate, that their faith in Christ would not of itself insure their final salvation ;

salvation; and that it must be their own personal adherence to piety and virtue, that must finally complete it. *Give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministred unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ^s.*

THE practice of righteousness is insisted on as the essence of religion with great force by the apostle John. *Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he (God) is righteous.—If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin:—Herein do we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; hereby know we that we are in him.—If ye know that he is*

D *righteous,*

^s 2 Peter i. 10, 11.

righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness, is born of him. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness, is not of God: neither he that loveth not his brother. St. John never intimates, that the best actions of men were in the sight of God of no account, and as filthy rags; but on the contrary, asserts that their keeping his commandments is a motive to the Deity to confer blessings on them; and that conscious integrity is a reasonable cause to excite confidence in us towards God. Beloved, if our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. The practice of benevolence, and social affection, are repeatedly and very strongly inculcated by him, as essential to the Christian character; and as the only proper criterion of our love to God. Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love.—Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word,

word, neither in tongue, but in deed, and in truth[†].

IN the book of Revelations, we find the necessity of keeping the commandments of God, in order to attain eternal life, clearly pointed out. *Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.—Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city*^u. *Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.—Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them*^v. And the following is the representation which is given in this book of the future judgment. *I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which*

D 2

were

[†] 1 John ii, iii, iv. ^u Revelations xxii. 12—14.
^v Revelations xiv. 12, 13.

were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works ^x.

Thus it appears to be the design of the new testament, through every part of it, to excite men to the steady practice of piety and virtue. It appears, that *the grace of God*, which *hath appeared unto all men* in the gospel dispensation, was intended to teach them, that *denying ungodliness, and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world* ^y. In which it perfectly coincides with those innumerable exhortations to the practice of righteousness, which occur in the old testament. And the doctrine of a future state of retribution is strongly pressed and inculcated as the principal motive to this. There are other motives occasionally spoken of, but this appears to be the great leading principle of the Christian revelation. The notions entertained by the Heathens of a future state appear to have been attended with much doubt and uncertainty; some of them appear to have considered it only as a poetic fiction; and some of their best writers in speaking of it, do it in a manner that shews they

^x Revelations xx. 12, 13. ^y Titus ii. 11, 12.

they rather *wished* for it, than really expected or believed it : and even the Jews themselves appear to have been much in the dark about it. And it is only by the gospel, that *life and immortality* hath been clearly *brought to light* ²; and the doctrine of a future state of retribution plainly revealed. And it certainly is a motive, that of all others may rationally be supposed to act the most forcibly upon mankind. For surrounded as man is in his present state, with innumerable temptations, tending to draw him from an adherence to his duty, perhaps there is no other that can through the general tenor of life be supposed to actuate him with sufficient force. When a man is abstracted from the temptations of the world, and in his closet, the motives to virtue which may be drawn from the nature and fitness of things, and the beauty of virtue, may operate with considerable strength upon the mind ; but even upon the best minds it should seem, that in an hour of severe temptation, the firm belief of a future state must have a much greater effect. And these more refined motives to virtue would perhaps be found to operate but faintly at any time upon the bulk of mankind ; for

D 3

whom

² 2 Timothy i. 10, *the gospel*

whom it was undoubtedly necessary that a divine revelation should be calculated. And it is acknowledged even by lord Shaftesbury, that “ this may be said as to the support
 “ which this belief of a future reward and
 “ punishment may prove to virtue ; that as
 “ it is capable of raising men to virtue, who
 “ were at first in a manner strangers to it ; so
 “ where men are already in a virtuous course,
 “ it may prove that which alone can save them
 “ from falling off from the virtue they possess,
 “ into a licentious and vicious practice ^a.”

NEITHER does the notion of men’s being excited to virtue, from the consideration of a future state of retribution, necessarily suppose them actuated merely by hope or fear, and the less ingenuous affections of the human mind. For, as the same noble writer observes, “ if
 “ by the thoughts of future reward, or what
 “ regards another state, be understood the
 “ love and desire of virtuous enjoyment, or
 “ of the very practice and exercise of virtue
 “ in another life ; the expectation or hope of
 “ this, must not only be a great encourage-
 “ ment to virtue ; but it appears plainly,
 “ that

^a Inquiry concerning Virtue, B. i. Sect. 3.

“ that the very following of virtue in hope to
“ attain that supreme happiness which consists
“ in the perfection of it, is of itself a degree
“ of virtue, and a proof of the sincere love
“ we have for it ^b.”

As the ideas of human nature which are suggested by the Calvinistical opinions, appears dishonourable both to man, and to his great Creator; and as the doctrine of man's free agency appears to be a matter of very considerable importance, and without admitting which it seems impossible to form any consistent ideas of religion, we shall make a few reflections upon those subjects.

THERE have been many, who seem to have thought, that they could in no way better evidence their own piety, than in degrading and vilifying human nature. It is not easy to conceive, that it could ever have been the dictate of reason, that there was any piety in any thing of this kind; or that it was honouring God to speak dishonourably of his creatures. For reason would rather have dictated, that it was doing more honour to the Almighty

D 4

Author

^b Ibid.

Author of nature, to form more favourable ideas of that, which, in its present state, whatever its imperfections may be, is indisputably the noblest part of the visible creation.

It is very evident, that the bulk of mankind are not virtuous; but it does by no means from thence follow, that they are depraved and impotent creatures, naturally prone to wickedness, and incapable of what is good and virtuous. Even amongst the most dissolute part of the human race, amongst those who indulge themselves in the practice of vice with the least scruple, there are discoverable by a candid observer many evidences of latent virtue; and actions really virtuous are frequently performed by those whose general character will not bear a strict scrutiny. And indeed the actual existence of vice amongst mankind, is no proof of their being under any invincible propensity to it; for if we suppose men free creatures, capable either of acting well or ill; and as being in a state of probation, in which they have many temptations to act contrary to the dictates of reason and conscience; it will account for the existence of moral evil in the world, without the necessity of supposing that they are by any inherent corruption of their nature biassed towards wickedness.

THERE

THERE are many particulars observable in human nature, which are very unfavourable to the notion of man's being naturally a wicked creature. It may be observed, that innocence is generally considered as one of the characteristics of childhood and youth; and that openness of heart, candour, benevolence, and the social affections appear to operate more, and the contrary dispositions less, in early life than at a later period; which seems to militate strongly against the notion of man's being naturally prone to wickedness. And perhaps, whenever dispositions of a different kind appear to prevail in childhood and youth, the whole of it may be attributed to ill example, or the want of a virtuous education. Children, naturally imitative, are fond of doing those things which they see done by others; their actions are therefore very much regulated by the conduct and behaviour of those about them. And we may rationally account for such perverseness and frowardness of behaviour, as may be sometimes discoverable in children, without having recourse to the supposition of their being naturally biassed towards vice. For as they have in them the seeds of those appetites and passions, which, however innocent in themselves, are vicious when not restrained within their proper bounds; it is easy to conceive,

ceive, that if they have ill examples set before them, and are suffered, while their judgment is weak and unformed, to let these natural appetites and passions take a wrong direction, those very children may be froward and vicious, who with judicious culture might have been tractable and virtuous *.

And it has often been observed, that the first advances to vice are made with reluctance; and that it is never practised without compunction, till men have hardened themselves by long habit to the practice of it: which seems to be an evidence, that wickedness is so far from

* It is too apparent, that the important business of education, particularly with respect to piety and morals, is in general very much neglected. Instead of instilling deeply into the minds of youth, their dependance on, and obligations to the Deity, and thoroughly grounding them in sentiments and principles of virtue, which are the most important points of a right education, their parents and preceptors are generally content with giving them a very slight and superficial view of these most important subjects; whilst a much greater attention and regard is paid merely to forming their exterior behaviour. As the happiness and stability of any nation depends so much on the virtue of its individuals; and as that very much depends on the method of education that prevails; this is a point that deserves the attention of all the friends to religion, virtue, and their country.

from being natural to man, that the practice of it is a rebellion against the first dictates of his nature. It is likewise certain, that it is natural to men to applaud and admire virtue in others, as well as to approve it in themselves. Sentiments of compassion, of benevolence, and social affection, are certainly natural to the human mind. And it may be affirmed farther, that sentiments of piety, the love and reverence of the Deity, are natural to human nature, when amiable and just ideas of him have been instilled and are imbibed. Instances of disinterested generosity and goodness excite gratitude and affection to the benefactor, by whom such services are bestowed, and such goodness displayed. These are the natural feelings and sentiments of humanity. And such sentiments naturally arise with respect to the Deity, when he is exhibited to the mind in a proper light.

THE doctrine of man's losing his natural ability to practice virtue, and aptitude to religion, by the fall, appears to have no real foundation in the scriptures. They only represent man as subject to temporal death by the fall, and not as thereby becoming incapable of religion, and prone only to the practice of vice and impiety. And Christ himself does not seem

seem by any means to have countenanced these unfavourable ideas of human nature. For we are told, that when his disciples enquired of him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he called a little child to him, and set him in the midst of them, and said unto them, *Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven*. And when his disciples rebuked those who brought young children to him, he was much displeased; and said, *Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of heaven*. Now can it be supposed, that Christ would have told his disciples, that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven they must become *as little children*, and that *of such* that kingdom consisted, if he had known them to be naturally polluted, and necessarily prone to wickedness? Must we not rather infer from these texts, that Christ considered young children as innocent, harmless, and teachable; and therefore proper emblems of that mild, peaceable, innocent, and humble disposition, which became the disciples of the blessed Jesus?

THERE

THERE is no sort of reason for imagining, that those appetites and passions which are found in human nature, and which, when not properly restrained and regulated, are the cause of sin, are any consequence of the corruption of human nature. They do on the contrary appear, when under proper restraints, to be very useful to mankind. And indeed, exclusive of this, something of this kind appears to be necessary to any creature while in a state of probation : for without something within themselves, which might in some degree prompt or excite them to a compliance with external temptations, they could not be considered as in a state of trial.

THE favourers of the Calvinistical opinions appear to have thought, that the representing man as a weak, and naturally wicked creature, tended to promote humility, and to advance and raise our ideas of the grace and goodness of God in the gospel-dispensation. Every attempt therefore to give more favourable representations of man's natural dispositions and ability, they consider as having a tendency to derogate from the grace of God, and diminish the glory of the gospel. And perhaps could they be convinced, that the contrary opinions had not this tendency, they might be induced

to

to examine them with more candour, and enquire with less prejudice and prepossession, how far their own opinions are really founded on the scriptures.

It seems to have been thought, that to assert that man possesses, by the constitution of his nature, at least in his present state, an aptitude and ability to act virtuously, is raising him at the expence of his Maker, and making him independent on his Creator. But this is absolutely mistaking the point. The warmest advocates for human nature, cannot be supposed to form any ideas of man's possessing any abilities or powers independent of his Maker, which he did not originally derive from him; and for the continuance of which, as well as for his existence itself, he does not absolutely depend upon his pleasure. The question therefore is not, whether man can act virtuously independent of God; (for in a certain sense we can do nothing without him; i. e. without his permission, and without his having originally given us suitable faculties and powers); but whether he has not framed and fitted all men by the constitution of their nature, in its present state, for a conformity to the laws of piety and virtue. This is certainly the light in which this point ought to be considered;

sidered ; and therefore, as God is as much the author and source of all our natural faculties and powers, as he must be supposed to be of any supernatural grace, the honour of God can be in no respect lessened by supposing that man is naturally capable of practising religion and virtue. On the contrary, if this be not admitted, it will be found impossible to maintain the honour of the Divine Being with any degree of consistency.

INDEED the Calvinistical notions of human nature appear contrary to the common sense and experience of mankind, and to every rational idea of religion, as well as to the general strain and tenor of the sacred writings. For amongst all mankind we find, that the performance of a good action is applauded, and the perpetration of a wicked one condemned and censured ; which is a demonstration that men commonly consider one another as free agents. And that inward remorse and disapprobation, which men feel after the commission of any wickedness, unless their consciences have been seared by a long course of iniquity, is another evidence of their possessing a freedom of action ; for this can only arise from an internal consciousness that they were capable of acting better. Were men impelled by any
invincible

invincible propensity in their natures to the practice of wickedness, it would be as absurd to censure a man for the commission of a crime, as to reproach an idiot for his want of understanding ; and to censure men for want of piety, if it consisted in any dispositions of mind out of their power to attain, would be as unreasonable as to reproach a deaf man for not hearing, or a blind man for not seeing. And these notions of human nature are so far from increasing our ideas of man's guilt, that they do in fact entirely acquit him of any. For if man has it not in his power to be pious and virtuous, and yet suffers for not being so, he is an unhappy creature, but cannot possibly be a guilty one. But the justice of the Divine Being will not admit us to form such a supposition. If man is to be punished for not practising the duties of religion, we must suppose that he has it in his power to perform them ; or his punishment would be both cruel and unjust. The very idea of a state of retribution necessarily implies in it the free agency of man. Is it possible for us to suppose, that the just and righteous judge of the universe, who must infallibly do right, will punish men for not being what they are by their very nature incapable of being ? Is this agreeable to any consistent ideas of the divine justice ?

And

And if it is not, can any creeds, can any human systems, be of sufficient authority to force our assent to such a doctrine?

THE whole strain and tenor of the sacred writings appears clearly to imply the ability of man to practice piety and virtue, and avoid their contraries. How otherwise can we understand those numberless exhortations to virtue and piety, and dehortations from vice, with which the old and the new testament are filled? Do not all the threatenings of punishment for disobedience, and promises of reward for obedience, in the law, in the prophets, and in the gospel, necessarily suppose a capability in the objects of them, of avoiding the one, and gaining the other? For with what propriety can it be imagined, that Moses and the prophets, that Christ and his apostles, exhorted men to the practice of those things which they knew they were incapable of practising?

INDEED there are innumerable passages of scripture, both in the old and in the new testament, that are utterly incapable of any rational and consistent interpretation, upon any other supposition than that of man's being a free agent. In the book of Deuteronomy, chap. xxx. 15—20. we find Moses making

E

this

this solemn and public declaration to the whole people of the Jews. *See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statutes, and his judgments:—I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore chuse life, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the Lord, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him.* What can we think of such a solemn declaration as this to the whole people of Israel, if Moses, at the very time he was making it, had known that by the natural perverseness and depravity of their natures, they were really incapable of loving and obeying God? Can it be supposed that he would have bid them chuse life (as the consequence of their obeying the commandments of God) and called heaven and earth to witness that he had set it before them, when he knew that they were naturally incapable of chusing it? And Moses appears, ver. 11, 12, 13, 14. of the same chapter, to have been so far from imagining them naturally incapable of performing the will of God, that he plainly asserts, that as they knew the will of God, they

they could have no excuse for not doing it; which manifestly supposes it was in their power to do so. *This commandment which I command thee this day, it is not bidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.*

THE free agency of man is evidently implied in those pathetic expostulations which are made to the Jewish people in the prophecies of Ezekiel. *Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed, and make you a new heart, and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? for I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn ye yourselves, and live ye*^d. They are here manifestly supposed capable of casting from them all their transgressions, and of turning to God. The Almighty declares, *I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth*. God had not been wanting on his side: he had given them

E 2 faculties

^d Ezekiel xviii. 31.

faculties and powers sufficient for the purposes of religion, but they had neglected to employ them. To the same purpose it is said by St. Paul, that *God would have all men to be saved* *. How is it possible to explain this, with any degree of consistency, unless we consider men as free creatures. If the salvation of all men depended on the will of God, independent of their own actions ; and it was the will of God that all men should be saved ; what was it that could possibly prevent it ? God certainly might have elected, or given a sufficient degree of grace, to one man as well as to another. But if we consider men as free agents, capable of acting either well or ill, even independent of their Maker, whilst they continue in possession of that freedom of choice which he hath originally given them ; the difficulty then vanishes. It is agreeable to the will of the good and merciful Father of our spirits, that all men should conform themselves to the laws of piety and virtue, and thereby qualify themselves for the enjoyment of eternal happiness : but as he has made them free creatures, this depends upon their own choice ; and it is from thence it arises, that though it is the will of God that all

* Timothy ii. 4.

all men should be saved, yet there are many who notwithstanding will not be saved. God hath done his part; but they, being free to accept the terms of salvation or to refuse them, have not co-operated with the benevolent intentions of the Deity.

ANY instances which may be produced of the Almighty having influenced the actions of some particular individuals, on extraordinary and particular occasions, are no just argument against the general doctrine of the free agency of man. We know that in the natural world, as well as in the moral, there are instances of the divine interposition on particular occasions; although in the ordinary course of divine providence, things are suffered to go on according to the fixed and established laws of nature. Neither does our admitting the free agency of man, and his natural capability of religion and virtue, exclude the doctrine of *divine assistance*. For though men naturally possess such an ability, yet the divine being may certainly communicate any irradiations, or internal assistances, which his infinite wisdom for any wise reasons may at any time see fit and proper; and which may not in the least interfere with their natural freedom of action. It appears however very certain, that we have now no
reason

reason to expect assistances of that sort, in the same degree in which they were communicated in the time of the apostles, and in the first age of Christianity. The interposition of the Deity was at that time more apparent, and it certainly was more needful in the first establishment of the gospel, than it can be in these ages. And undue pretences to divine illumination have been such a source of the most extravagant enthusiasm, that they should therefore by intelligent Christians be very carefully avoided.

UPON the whole, it is very evident, that it is the universal sense of all mankind, in judging of their own actions, and those of other men, that they are free creatures. The very existence of human laws and government supposes it. Without supposing them masters of their own actions, they cannot be considered as accountable for them. To reward or punish any beings, either in the present or the future world, for actions which they did not voluntarily perform, and which they could not have avoided, would be both unjust and absurd. The consequence is clear and evident : either men have it in their power to obey the dictates of reason and religion, or they have not : if they have, they are properly moral and accountable creatures, and proper objects of reward

reward and punishment; if they have not, they cannot be accountable for their actions, nor can they, with the least justice or propriety, be either punished or rewarded. And the whole tenor of revelation manifestly supposes men to be free agents. On any other supposition, the whole scheme of religion appears full of confusion and disorder, an inexplicable mystery: but if we admit that men are free creatures, and consequently accountable for their actions, these difficulties vanish, and the whole system of religion appears rational, intelligible, harmonious, and consistent. We then naturally consider the present state as a state of trial; to the very idea of which temptations are essential; and future rewards and punishments then appear natural and necessary.

It appears then that there is no foundation in reason for the Calvinistical doctrines; and it hath been shewn that there is as little real foundation for them in revelation; that they are not the doctrines of scripture, but the inventions of men; and that the great design of the Christian revelation is to promote the practice of righteousness. But how inconsistent with this are the methods that are sometimes taken to depreciate moral virtue? That which
the

the scriptures invariably represent as one of the most essential parts of religion, without which they could never expect to be approved or accepted by God, is by many Christian teachers numbered (as Swift expresses it) among the *beggarly elements*.

THE absurd and inconsistent representations that have frequently been given of the Christian system by its mistaken friends, appear to have done it more real disservice, than all the writings of the deists. The opposition of the deists hath in some respects been very serviceable to Christianity: it hath occasioned the evidences of its divine original to be more diligently enquired into, and more clearly pointed out. And it hath shewn that the gospel is superior to all the attacks of its keenest adversaries. But the absurd notions which have been propagated of the Christian religion by many of its professors, have prevented its having its proper effect upon many of those who did profess a belief in it; and hath been a great means of adding strength to the attacks of its adversaries. For indeed many of the arguments of the deistical writers are levelled, not so much against Christianity itself, as against some mistaken representations of it: but which they, as it best answered their purpose, thought proper

proper to consider as the real doctrines of Christianity.

THE religion of Jesus, when it is considered distinct from those absurd additions with which men have frequently obscured and disfigured it, must excite the approbation and the reverence of every man. Were it always represented in its genuine, in its native beauty, religion could never be made the subject of raillery and ridicule. The Christian revelation exhibits the Deity in the most endearing and engaging characters; as the God of love, and the father and friend of the whole human race. It teaches a piety and devotion, not confined either to time or place, nor composed of superstitious and external rites and ceremonies; but pure, spiritual, and rational. It enforces the utmost purity of heart, and the greatest simplicity, integrity, and rectitude of manners. And it inculcates a benevolence not confined either to sects, or parties, or countries; but of the most diffusive and disinterested kind. In short, it is the design of Christianity to promote whatsoever is really noble, excellent, amiable, and praise-worthy; whatsoever can refine, perfect, ennoble, and dignify humanity.